

I Claim:

1. A method for searching a content database stored in computer storage, the database including a plurality of records each containing multiple fields of information, the method comprising the steps of:

maintaining a structure database in computer storage in which each record is parsed into a plurality of categories containing multiple fields of information, each category having at least one sub-category, the sub-categories being structured in at least one sub-level based upon a relationship between the information in sub-categories, the structure database containing category structure information defining the data structure of each category;

receiving a search query containing a subset of the categories contained in a record, which subset may include all of the categories, the query containing selection information indicating those sub-categories that should be present in records being sought by the query;

for categories present in the query subset, performing a correlation between the selection information and information from the structure database representing the sub-category structure in a subset of the records, which subset may contain all of the records, to produce a relevance value for a record; and

as a response to the query, selecting information from records in the content database based upon the relevance value of the records.

2. The method of claim 1 wherein the correlation step is performed by correlating selection information for a chosen category with information from the structure database representing the sub-category structure of the same category in a subset of the records, which subset may contain all of the records, to produce a relevance value for the chosen category in each record of the subset, this correlating step being performed for a plurality of chosen categories; and, for a record, combining the relevance values of the plurality of chosen categories to produce a relevance value for the record.

3. The method of any preceding claim wherein the correlating step is different for two categories that have different data structures.

4. method of any preceding claim wherein performing a correlation includes assigning a weight to a sub-category in a record depending on whether that sub-category is present in the selection information, and using the assigned weight in the correlating step.

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5. The method of any preceding claim wherein performing a correlation includes assigning a weight to a sub-category in a record depending upon its level, and using the assigned weight in the correlating step.

10 6. A system for searching a content database stored in computer storage, the database including a plurality of records each containing multiple fields of information, the method comprising:

a structure database in computer storage in which each record is parsed into a plurality of categories containing multiple fields of information, each category having at least one sub-category, the sub-categories being structured in at least one sub-level based upon a relationship between the information in sub-categories, the structure database containing category structure information defining the data structure of each category;

15 a receiver for a search query containing a subset of the categories contained in a record, which subset may include all of the categories, the query containing selection information indicating those sub-categories that should be present in records being sought by the query;

20 a correlation device set performing a correlation between the selection information, for categories present in the query subset, and information from the structure database representing the sub-category structure in a subset of the records, which subset may contain all of the records, to produce a relevance value for a record; and

a unit responding to the query by selecting and providing information from records in the content database based upon the relevance value of the records.

7. The system of claim 6 wherein the correlation device correlates selection information for a chosen category with information from the structure database representing the sub-category structure of the same category in a subset of the records, which subset may contain all of the records, to produce a relevance value for a chosen category in each record of the subset, this correlation being performed for a plurality of chosen categories; and, a correlation device including a component combining the

relevance values of the plurality of chosen categories to produce a relevance value for the record.

8. The system of claim 6 or 7 wherein the correlation device is performs a
5 different operation for two categories that have different data structures.

9. The system of any of claims 6-8 wherein the correlation device includes
a component which assigns a weight to a sub-category in a record depending on whether
that sub-category is present in the selection information, and the correlation unit uses the
10 assigned weight in performing the correlation.

10. The system of any of claims 6-9 wherein the correlation unit includes a
component which assigns a weight to a sub-category in a record depending upon its level,
and the correlation unit uses the assigned weight in performing the correlation.

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11. The system of any of claims 6-10 provided with access to a network,
the content database being accessible from the network, the receiver and responding unit
communicating over the network.

12. The system of claim 11 wherein the content database is accessed
20 through the network.

13. In an online user forum of the type permitting communication among a
plurality of users and also permitting users to post information content for access by users,
25 the improvement comprising a reputation module storing a reputation rating for a user in
association with information content, a user's reputation being a function of the degree his
participation in the forum.

14. The forum of claim 13 wherein the reputation module is constructed so
30 that a first user's reputation rating is dependent upon the evaluation by other users of the
information posted by the first user.

15. The forum of claim 13 or 14 wherein the reputation module is constructed so that a first user's reputation rating is dependent upon his evaluation of information posted by other users.

5 16. The forum of claim 14 or 15 wherein the reputation module is constructed so that a first user's reputation rating is dependent more the evaluation by other users of the information posted by the first user than upon the first user's evaluation of information posted by other users.

10 17. In combination with the forum of any one of claims 13-16, a system for searching a content database stored in computer storage, the database including a plurality of records each containing multiple fields of information, the method comprising:

 a structure database in computer storage in which each record is parsed into a plurality of categories containing multiple fields of information, each category having at
15 least one sub-category, the sub-categories being structured in at least one sub-level based upon a relationship between the information in sub-categories, the structure database containing category structure information defining the data structure of each category;

 a receiver for a search query containing a subset of the categories contained in a record, which subset may include all of the categories, the query containing selection
20 information indicating those sub-categories that should be present in records being sought by the query;

 a correlation device set performing a correlation between the selection information, for categories present in the query subset, and information from the structure database representing the sub-category structure in a subset of the records, which subset
25 may contain all of the records, to produce a relevance value for a record; and

 a unit responding to the query by selecting and providing information from records in the content database based upon the relevance value of the records.

18. The combination of claim 17 wherein the correlation device correlates
30 selection information for a chosen category with information from the structure database representing the sub-category structure of the same category in a subset of the records, which subset may contain all of the records, to produce a relevance value for a chosen category in each record of the subset, this correlation being performed for a plurality of chosen categories; and, a correlation device including a component combining the

relevance values of the plurality of chosen categories to produce a relevance value for the record.

19. The combination of claim 17 or 18 wherein the correlation device is
5 performs a different operation for two categories that have different data structures.

20. The combination of any of claims 17-19 wherein the correlation device
includes a component which assigns a weight to a sub-category in a record depending on
whether that sub-category is present in the selection information, and the correlation unit
10 uses the assigned weight in performing the correlation.

21. The combination of any of claims 17-20 wherein the correlation unit
includes a component which assigns a weight to a sub-category in a record depending
upon its level, and the correlation unit uses the assigned weight in performing the
15 correlation.

22. The combination of any of claims 12-21 provided with access to a
network, the content database being accessible from the network, the receiver and
responding unit communicating over the network.

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23. The system of claim 22 wherein the content database is accessed
through the network.

24. A method for improving an online user forum of the type permitting
25 communication among a plurality of users and also permitting users to post information
content for access by users, the method comprising maintaining a reputation rating for a
user in association with information content, a user's reputation being a function of the
degree of his participation in the forum.

25. The method of claim 24 wherein a first user's reputation rating is
30 dependent upon the evaluation by other users of information posted by the first user.

26. The method of claim 24 or 25 wherein a first user's reputation rating is
dependent upon his evaluation of information posted by other users.

27. The method of anyone of claims 24-26 wherein a first user's reputation rating is dependent more the evaluation by other users of information posted by the first user than upon the first user's evaluation of information posted by other users.